

Judge Westbrooks investiture celebrates those who shaped her life

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“If I try hard enough, I can do anything. All I have to do is just try,” Mississippi Court of Appeals Judge Latrice Westbrooks told colleagues, friends and family at her investiture on Wednesday, Feb. 1, in Jackson.

She recited those words every day as an elementary school student in Memphis, and she relied on that motto as an adult. Judge Westbrooks, 44, of Lexington, took the oath of office on Jan. 3 as the newest judge of the Mississippi Court of Appeals. She repeated the oath Wednesday at her formal investiture ceremony before a crowd that packed the courtroom and overflowed into an adjacent room at the Gartin Justice Building.



Judge James E. Graves Jr. of the Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals administered the ceremonial oath. “It is my honor to administer the oath of office to Judge Latrice Westbrooks,” he said.

Mississippi Court of Appeals Chief Judge L. Joseph Lee, who presided over the ceremony, said, “I think that Judge Westbrooks has fulfilled her destiny in life.” Her initials are “LAW.”

Judge Westbrooks paid homage to those who shaped her life and her thinking: her grandparents and mother, college professors and leaders of the struggle for civil rights.

Feb. 1 would have been her late grandfather’s 94th birthday. Joe Lee Westbrooks of Tallahatchie County, her grandmother Frances Westbrooks, and her mother, Lucille Westbrooks Bennett, instilled values. Her mother and grandmother, her aunt, Linda Westbrooks, and friend Leyser Q. Hayes were at her side during the investiture.

“A person, whether they are a candidate or a judge or elected official, is the sum total of his and her experiences and Joe Lee Westbrooks was definitely a part of my experience as a child, as a young adult, and as a young woman, and today is not just my day, today is just not the day for my mother and my grandmother, but is also a day for him and to honor him and his memory,”



Judge Westbrook said.

She reflected on freedoms won by the sacrifices of people like Medgar Evers and Fannie Lou Hamer. Judge Westbrook came to the bench in Mississippi's bicentennial year. "I note that 200 years ago, that my ancestors, for them this was just a mere thought, and the thought alone could have gotten them killed. I do not take that lightly, I do not take that for granted and it is something that will always be remembered, and as I sit in this position I will respect that and I will honor that," she said.

She recalled the profound influence of two of her professors at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tenn.: Dr. A. J. Stovall and Dr. James Mock. As a sophomore, she took an African-American studies class taught by Dr. Stovall. "That decision changed my life forever. It changed my thinking. It changed my trajectory. It changed everything."

Dr. Mock "was the first one to teach me and to tell me, never be afraid to stand straight and have your shoulders square and look a man straight in his eyes and tell him the truth. I have carried that with me since my days at Austin Peay," she said.



Dr. Stovall, now chairman of the Division of Social Science at Rust College, was one of the guest speakers at the investiture. "You gave me an understanding that I needed to have an Afrocentric understanding and why that is so very important, and I thank you for that," she told him.

Dr. Stovall recalled traveling with Westbrook across two continents. "She really had the opportunity to meet some of the shakers and movers of the movement," he said. She was one of the first people to have an audience with Nelson Mandela when he was released from prison.

Dr. Stovall said he is proud to be her mentor and friend. "I am confident that this little girl from south Memphis will serve the 24 counties of her district well and honorably. She possesses the integrity, the character, the sense of fairness, rounded with the

common touch, just high morals, God fearing, well educated and trained and experienced. She is just an everyday loving, caring person."